

2019 Elk Hunting Season Forecasts by Region

Casper

Elk numbers remain at or above objective levels in all herds in the Casper Region. Elk season recommendations therefore continue to be extremely liberal in terms of season length and license issuance. In recent years, elk harvest has approached or exceeded record levels in many Casper Region herds. The Casper Region continues to provide excellent bull elk hunting opportunities, with many areas reporting excellent harvest success on any-elk licenses and good mature bull antler quality in recent years. Antlerless elk hunter success continues to be good in most of the Region, although high hunter densities on public lands often result in reduced hunter success in the early fall.

In the Laramie Peak/Muddy Mountain elk herd (Hunt Areas 7 and 19), overall elk harvest continues to be outstanding as cooperation with landowners has resulted in good hunter access for cow elk on private lands along with expanding Walk-In-Area and Hunter Management Area opportunities. Unfortunately, harvest success did decline in 2018, although this was due to atypical elk movements to lower elevation areas early in the season following an unseasonable cold and snowy late October and early November. Elk hunting in the Laramie Range should continue to be good this coming fall, although hunter success on public lands during October and November rifle seasons has diminished in recent years as many elk tend to congregate on private lands with restricted hunting access. Availability of elk on public lands during September archery seasons continues to be excellent. Antlerless elk seasons will again run through January in both Hunt Areas 7 and 19, although only 50 Type 7 (January) licenses will be issued in Hunt Area 7.

Antlerless hunting opportunities will extend through mid-December in Hunt Areas 23 and 120 until the end of December in Hunt Area 122. Overall, elk harvest success in Hunt Area 23 continues to be limited as the vast majority of elk tend to congregate on one large ranch with little to no hunting pressure. Over the course of the season, elk do occasionally leave this property and become available on adjacent public lands, or can be found in small groups in other portions of the hunt area. This results in moderate elk harvest over the course of a long season, although hunters typically expend more effort per animal here than in other hunt areas within the Casper Region.

Elk hunting in the Black Hills continues to be a mixed bag. Hunters with access to private lands, where the majority of elk occur, have been doing well while public land hunters in Hunt Area 116 typically have little success. The general license season in Hunt Area 116 was designed to increase elk harvest on private lands while allowing for some opportunistic elk harvest on National Forest, where elk numbers are low. Elk densities on the Bearlodge portion of the Black Hills National Forest have always been low during the fall as hunting pressure and human activity quickly displaces them to private lands. Expectations of harvesting an elk on National Forest in Hunt Area 116 should therefore be tempered. Hunters should note that all cow/calf license types valid in Hunt Area 116 have been combined into one Type 7 license that is valid off National Forest. License quotas for Hunt Area 1 will remain relatively low as overall harvest success has been lower than desired in recent years. Finally, in Hunt Area 117, some increased opportunity for antlerless elk harvest should again be provided for early and late season hunters on select private lands to reduce elk damage. Here, hunters should note that all cow/calf license types were combined into one Type 7 license last year to simplify regulations. In addition, a new Type 2 license was added for Hunt Area 117 to permit spike and antlerless harvest. Overall, season recommendations for 2019 will continue to emphasize female elk harvest throughout the Casper

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Region, while also providing good mature bull hunting in most areas. Those hunters willing to expend the effort should continue to enjoy remarkable numbers of elk and good success if the weather cooperates.

Cody

A majority of elk populations within the Cody region remain above management objectives and calf ratios ranging from 17 calves per 100 cows to 52:100. Calf ratios are 20 calves per 100 cows or less on the western side of the Bighorn Basin, while calf ratios are much higher on the eastern side of the basin in the Bighorn Mountains. The Clarks Fork (Hunt Areas 51, 53 and 54) herd is the only elk herd within the Cody region that is below its established management objective.

The 2018-2019 has been relatively mild, with the exception of a very cold February, causing managers to believe overwinter survival for the regions elk populations to be average, or slightly above average. Winter elk flights suggest that most of the regions elk herds are either stable or increasing.

Managers are proposing to increase cow/calf license in those areas that are well above management objectives, like Hunt Areas 41, 61 and 66. Cody regional managers also developed some proposals to reduce harvest on elk that spend their summer and fall within the Thorofare drainage, as this portion of the Cody elk herd population appears to be decreasing slightly. Hunters should expect the 2019 elk season to be similar to that of the 2018 season.

Green River

The Green River manages six elk herd units and twelve hunt areas, under varying management schemes. All are currently above the post-season population objectives. With a few exceptions, most general license areas in this region have liberal “any elk” seasons, followed by lengthy general license “antlerless” seasons. They also have fairly liberal numbers of antlerless licenses or additional cow-calf licenses available. General license herd units in this region include: West Green River (Hunt Areas 102-105), Uinta (Hunt Areas 106 and 107), and Sierra Madre elk (Hunt Areas 13, 15, 21, 108 and 130). Hunting will remain good in all of these areas. Fairly liberal seasons will continue in all these herds until objectives are achieved. Elk herds above objective have a potential to negatively impact other species, and are often in conflict with agriculture. These conflicts range from direct loss of stored crops to disease concerns, primarily brucellosis. Elk seasons have been dramatically liberalized during the past decade in an effort to check growth and return numbers to appropriate levels. Hunters should be aware that this management shift will reduce elk populations and the level of hunter satisfaction in general license herd units may also decline.

The Green River Region also manages two herd units under limited quota special management, and an additional limited quota herd designated as “recreational management.” In reality, due to public desires, all three are managed under the special management criteria, meaning high bull to cow ratios and the presence of older-aged males. Both the Steamboat (Hunt Area 100) and the South Rock Springs (Hunt Area 30, 32) herds are under special management guidelines and managers propose conservative harvest levels to maintain a quality hunting experience. Both herds are very popular with the hunting community. In the case of the South Rock Springs herd, managers are constantly balancing elk management with the needs of the South Rock Springs mule

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deer herd. While one likely has negative impacts on the other, the need for this balance is difficult to achieve. Recent trend count data suggest that current season structure has been too conservative, and more licenses are proposed in the Steamboat herd (Hunt Area 100), especially for antlerless elk.

Opportunity in the Petition herd unit (Unit Area 124) was increased in 2012 and 2015 in response to public comments and concern over increasing elk numbers and their impacts to deer and pronghorn. Liberal cow hunting opportunity is maintained on and near the Tipton HMA to reduce landowner conflicts, while bull harvest remains fairly conservatively to allow for older aged bulls.

Jackson

In the Jackson Elk Herd, 9,627 elk were counted during the February 2019 mid-winter survey, including 6,586 on the National Elk Refuge (NER). Due to the mild early winter conditions, elk were widely distributed when heavy snows commenced in early February and remained widely distributed for the remainder of the winter, which definitely affected the sightability of elk. Although only 86 elk were found in the Gros Ventre during the 2017-18 winter, 2,136 elk were observed there in the 2018-19 winter. Based on movements of radio collared elk, 500 or more elk left the Gros Ventre to winter on the NER. Similar to past years, portions of the herd that migrate from Yellowstone National Park, the Teton Wilderness and the Gros Ventre drainage continue to exhibit low calf recruitment compared to elk that summer in southern Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) and near residential and agricultural areas close to Jackson that have about double the calf recruitment as the long-distance migratory elk in backcountry areas. Managing for these widely varying population segments has always been and will continue to be a challenge in the Jackson Herd.

Conservative hunting seasons are proposed for Hunt Areas 70, 71 and 81-83 to address low calf recruitment while trying to maintain bull numbers, and area 79 in GTNP will be closed in order to lend more protection to long-distance migrants. In the southern portion of the herd unit in Hunt Areas 75, 77, 78 and 80, antlerless elk seasons are proposed to address growing elk populations that summer along the Snake River corridor in southern Grand Teton National Park and subdivisions in Hunt Area 78. A slight reduction in Hunt Area 75 licenses is a cautionary response to the lower herd unit trend count and will continue to be evaluated and adjusted as the need to harvest antlerless elk varies.

In Hunt Area 78, Type 1 licenses will be valid off national forest beginning on August 15, and will be valid in the entire hunt area beginning on September 26. And for the third year there will be a general license season in Hunt Area 78, valid for antlerless elk on private lands only from August 15 – October 31. Also, for the second year, there will be a Type 2 license for any elk on private lands from August 15-October 31. The Type 7 license will be removed this year due to issues with wounded elk crossing private land boundaries. Hunters who wish to use limited-range weapons may still do so on other license types. The hunting season in Hunt Area 78 is structured to harvest elk that are causing chronic damage to agricultural lands, disperse animals, and reduce elk numbers. In Hunt Area 75 for 2019, there will be 25 fewer Type 4 and 175 fewer Type 6 licenses as were available in 2018. Type 4 license-holders will not be able to hunt in Hunt Area 79, as it has been closed for the 2019 season, but will still be able to hunt that portion of Hunt Area 81 west of the Shadow Mountain Loop Road. The area known as the Snake River Bottom in Hunt Area

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75 will be closed again this year, but the State Section near Kelly Warm Springs will be opened again for the entire season. As in the past, the Department's Hunter Management Access system will be used to allocate permits for the National Elk Refuge (Hunt Area 77). The youth hunt is again proposed to occur from November 28 to 30 this year during the Thanksgiving school break. Those with a full price Youth License can apply for a permit to access the National Elk Refuge during that time.

Presumably due to declining opportunities to hunt antlerless elk in other areas around Jackson, many hunters have shifted into Hunt Area 80 creating many complaints of hunter crowding. To address this situation the General Any Elk season ran from September 26 to October 31 in 2018. After that only Hunt Area 80 Type 6 hunters were afield from November 1 to November 30. The customary closure north of the Sheep Creek Road remained in place from November 12-30. Even though elk movements into Hunt Area 80 were less than normal, hunter success was still 38%, and hunter satisfaction improved over that of past years.

It is anticipated that the 2019 hunting season will focus hunting pressure on southern segments of the Jackson elk population that exhibit high calf recruitment and contribute to high numbers on the National Elk Refuge. In addition, lower calf production observed in long-distance migratory segments over the past several years will continue to influence recruitment and contribute to the need for conservative hunting seasons proposed for the backcountry segments of this population.

Elk surveys in the Fall Creek Herd yielded approximately 600 more elk in 2018 compared to the mild winter of 2017. This herd has been slightly below objective and management efforts have been directed at increasing elk numbers and preserving bull ratios. Due to the increased trend count, the general, any elk season will open September 26 and close on October 13, allowing 4 additional days of any elk hunting opportunity compared to 2018. General license antlered elk, spikes excluded hunting will continue through October 31. This is the fifth year of general license hunting for any elk, with a spikes excluded restriction, which should allow more yearling bulls to be recruited into the population. Increases have been made to the Hunt Area 84 Type 6 and the Hunt Area 84, 85 Type 7 licenses in order to provide slightly more opportunity and to assist in addressing damage situations on private lands.

In the Afton Herd, hunting seasons for antlered elk in the lower Greys River (Hunt Area 89) will again be extended through October 31. The increase in hunting recreation in the lower Greys River is a result of higher numbers of elk counted on the Greys River feedground at Alpine and on native winter ranges in Greys River. In Hunt Area 90, liberal seasons into November and limited quota cow or calf tags are again being proposed to address an increase in elk numbers in the Upper Greys River.

The Targhee Elk Herd (Hunt Area 73) is a small population on the west side of the Teton Range that is managed to provide recreational hunting opportunities. Most crucial winter ranges are situated in Idaho and options to allow this population to grow are limited. In 2018, hunters reported a 52% success rate. Proposed hunting seasons in 2019 will be unchanged from 2018 and will include a general license season for antlered elk, spikes excluded from September 20 through October 25. A new, Type 6 license first offered in 2017 will again be valid for cow or calf elk on private land only from August 15–January 31.

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Lander

Like much of Wyoming, elk populations are doing well across the Lander Region and all herd units are near their objective. Calf production remains on par with previous years and should result in continued robust elk numbers. Similarly, observed bull to cow ratios remain strong over most of central Wyoming. If favorable weather conditions are realized during this fall, hunters should experience excellent harvest opportunity and success in all hunt areas. With elk herds near objective in almost all locations, the 2019 seasons are designed to maintain elk numbers near current numbers.

Laramie

Most elk populations in the Laramie region are above management objectives. Despite relatively liberal seasons, populations continue to be highly productive, with calf ratios that often exceed 40 calves: 100 cows. Limited public access in herds with a large percentage of private land, such as Iron Mountain, can hinder the Department's ability to curtail growth. While this makes reaching herd objectives difficult, it provides good opportunities for hunters to harvest elk, especially those with permission to access private land.

Recent research in the Sierra Madre mountains suggests that the bark-beetle epidemic has altered how elk use the landscape during the summer. Marked animals generally avoided beetle-killed forest during the day, in favor of intact conifer stands, resulting in potential habitat loss. Some of these losses however, may be offset by improved habitat conditions following a number of recent fires in 2018, especially in the Sierra Madre and Snowy Range Herd Units.

Laramie region managers are proposing to continue liberal elk seasons in 2019, with increased opportunity in the Snowy Range Elk Herd. Much of the elk habitat in the Snowy Range Herd overlaps public land, with good hunter access.

Pinedale

There are four elk herds in the Pinedale Region: Hoback, Pinedale, Piney and Upper Green. Liberal seasons have been in place for several years and are designed to drive populations down to objective levels, while maintaining at least 15 bulls:100 cows in the post-hunt populations. All herds met bull ratio objectives, ranging from 19 bulls:100 cows in the Hoback herd to 29 bulls:100 cows in the Upper Green River herd. Elk attendance was average on most feedgrounds in the Pinedale Region, a result of the average winter conditions experienced during the 2018-2019 winter. Calf:cow ratios averaged 32:100 among the four herds, ranging from 30:100 in the Pinedale herd to 39:100 in the Hoback elk herd. Elk hunter harvest in 2018 was slightly lower in most Pinedale Region elk herds due to warmer than average conditions during fall combined with the late arrival of snow.

The Piney Elk herd is currently within the established population objective after numerous years of liberal seasons to keep the herd from growing. Liberal seasons are again planned for the 2019 hunting season. Hunt Areas 92 and 94 will open October 1 for limited quota Type 6 cow or calf only hunting and extend to November 23. These licenses will extend to the end of January for a portion of Hunt Area 92. A Type 7 cow or calf only license will allow hunters to take advantage

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of the month of November to harvest an elk north of Middle Piney Creek in Hunt Area 94. There will be a total of 800 Type 6 cow or calf licenses available in Hunt Areas 92 and 94 and seasons will run through November 23 to reduce elk numbers.

Elk numbers in the Pinedale herd (Hunt Areas 97 and 98) have been very stable in recent years and remain within the established population objective. Hunting seasons have been designed to increase antlerless harvest and lower population levels. Hunter success in the Pinedale elk herd remains to be among the highest in the region, with an overall 33% success rate. The 2019 seasons are again designed to target antlerless elk and lower population levels.

The 2019 hunting season in the Hoback herd will offer general license any elk hunting through October 31 in Hunt Areas 86 and 87. This herd is being managed to provide recreational opportunities while maintaining 15 bull:100 cow ratios. An increase in the number of elk wintering in the northern portion of hunt area 87 will allow for simplified regulations in 2019; all of Hunt Area 87 will be open for general license hunters for antlerless elk November 1-5.

With stable elk numbers in the Upper Green River herd the past two years, 2019 hunting seasons will continue expanded antlerless elk hunting opportunities, with an increase in Type 6 licenses and additional days added to season length in Hunt Area 96. This herd is slightly above the stated objective of 2500 elk, and is managed with a combination of general and limited quota licenses to meet management objectives.

Sheridan

The Sheridan Region contains part or all of four elk herd units. Elk seasons are designed to provide ample opportunity to harvest elk in hunt areas where populations are over objective, while more conservative seasons are set for those hunt areas where numbers are near desired levels. Limited access to private lands for elk hunting has been the primary factor contributing to herds exceeding management objectives. Hunters who gain access to hunt or cross private lands are expected to have high success. Mature bulls are available in all hunt areas and hunters have a reasonable chance of harvesting a mature bull.

In Hunt Areas 33, 34, 35, 36, 37 and 38, most antlerless and cow/calf elk hunting seasons will run until December 31 to provide opportunity to harvest elk as they move toward winter ranges. Along the Bighorn Mountains, elk find refuge on some private lands. Type 6 hunting seasons in Hunt Areas 34, 35, 36 and 37 have been restructured to target cow/calf elk on private lands. Hunters are reminded that liberal license quotas and leftover licenses do not mean hunter access is readily available.

Sportsmen will have an increased opportunity to hunt bull elk in Hunt Area 38 with more Type 1 and 9 license being offered. Quotas were reduced four years ago due to lower bull numbers. The more conservative seasons allowed the bull segment to recover.

Hunt Area 2 is also known as the Fortification Elk Herd. The elk population is over the management objective and there are more elk than most landowners desire. The 2019 hunting season will be limited to antlerless elk harvest as the bull season will be closed. Prospective hunters are advised to secure private land access before purchasing Hunt Area 2 licenses.

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In the Rochelle Hills Elk Herd, Hunt Area 113 will be open in 2019 as this area alternates hunting seasons every other year. Favorable hunter access and good bull quality make these licenses tough to draw. The Hunt Area 123 season will be closed this fall.

Hunt Area 129 is again open for general license and cow/calf hunting. Elk are in small, scattered herds throughout this hunt area, mostly on private land. Finding access to hunt is very important prior to going hunting. Hunt Area 129 is not considered a “destination hunt” for most hunters, but rather offers more of an opportunity for hunters living nearby to harvest elk when they become available.